

THE ART OF INDEXING IN NAMITA GOKHALE'S *MOUNTAIN ECHOES* (1998)

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Abstract

*Writings by women in the last decades of twentieth century have moved away from the quest for identity to what Julia Kristeva calls Feminist Phase. Women writings in India particularly of late have increased by leaps and bounds giving a vent to their repressed thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions unabashedly and boldly. There is a recognizable shift from Trauma to Triumph! This paper is divided into two sections. The first section deals with feminism as a discourse. Care will be taken to examine the fashion in which the gendered subaltern position of women finds a mode for indenting and indexing in this rapid age of information technology and scientific advancements. The second section of the paper focuses on Namita Gokhale's *Mountain Echoes*(1999) which permeates to the reader through the consciousness of four talented and highly individualistic women namely Shivani, Tara Pande, Jeeya and Shakuntala Pande along with an evocative recollection of life in Kumaon hills. Born into An orthodox Thulldhoti Brahmin community, the four women recollect their past lives not just as mothers and grandmothers but also highlight the fruits of education to women in a pre- independent era. Literacy in fact transforms them into cultural icons with an intense sense of loyalty to the clan and community. In Gokhale's own words " in my upbringing, in subliminal code, I had imbibed from these women, 'femininity' that never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but strength, physical, emotional moral of my sex." How Namita Gokhale visualizes these women characters as symbols of dignity, strength, integrity and sheer indestructible grit will be discussed. Deliberating on how these four women were witness to the transitions and paradigm shifts of the century, how they become a testimony to the strength and vitality of Kumaoni culture and its traditions will be the focus of attention. And also how ecology formulates the lives of kumaoni women. Does *Mountain Echoes* unearth the unsung heroines of the hills revealing their stubborn courage and indomitable will in the process providing a platform for re-membering their selves? Can *Mountain Echoes* be viewed as a socio-cultural piece of evidence for the changing status of women in India? Is Gokhale's book arguing a case for "Personal is Political" ? Is education and literacy essential for women to voice their presence and opinion? These and other related issues will be examined in the paper.*

Keywords:*Feminism, cultural icons, kumaoni culture, femininity, ecology, feminist phase.*

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It is said that the worth of a civilization can be judged from the position that it gives to women. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture, one of the vital issues is the honoured place accorded to women. One of the verses in the classical text *Manusmriti* says, *Yatr Naryasto Pujyante, Ramantay Tatr Devta*, i.e., where women are accorded a place of honor, Gods are pleased to reside there. But in the course of time, deterioration in the status of women took place considerably, noticeably after the Muslim invasion in India. But today, in the rapid age of information technology and scientific advancements, there is a recognizable shift in women's status, from that of trauma to triumph!

Feminism is a product of Europe and most particularly the European Enlightenment. As feminist scholars have demonstrated, women have always attempted to identify and assert their prerogatives. Feminism in literature is essentially an attempt to examine the space occupied by women in a sexist culture. Since women are relegated to the margins in an androcentric set up, women writers have attempted to dismantle such a position and have tried to index their selves. The early signs of feminism in the west can be traced to 1550-1700 where attempts to present the grounds to challenge patriarchy took place. The reign of queen Elizabeth, Anna Denmark, Countess of Bedford and Pembroke showed that women were not inferior to men given an opportunity. Mary Wollstonecraft's "A vindication for the rights of women" (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjugation of Women* (1869), Margret Fuller's "Women in the Nineteenth Century" (1845), the writings of Anglo-American and French Feminists stand as fine examples for western feminist Discourse. Interestingly, Western feminism can be striated into three phases- the first wave feminism which begins with Mary Wollstonecraft, exhibited activism and heated debates regarding women in the society. Second wave which begins in the 1970s branded first wave feminism as individualistic and reformist. The second wave which focused on issues of marriage, child rearing, sexual practices provided a base for "women's liberation". This phase produced a variety of schools of thought about the nature of gender oppression, the appropriate goals of feminism and optional means of reaching these goals. Major theories associated with second wave feminism are liberal feminism, cultural feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism. The third wave feminism which overlapped with second-wave feminisms, produced elaborations and critiques of previous theories and posits of first and second wave feminism. This phase is also called Post feminism which is very strongly influenced by the market forces. Post feminism grapples with cosmetic surgery, fashion, women of colour and global generation X.

Feminism in India is a social movement which, largely focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests and issues in society. In "Indigenous roots of feminism" Jasbir Jain avers that, "feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth... It does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create new ones" Thus, feminist discourse in India over the past two hundred years has been shaped by the colonial past, on the one hand, and the opposition to foreign domination, on the other. Also, it has always struggled to create a space for women to fight against cultural impositions and religious restrictions, which underline and reinforce the economic, social, political and psychological suppression vis-à-vis Indian cultural contexts. Writings of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore, Mahashwetaha Devi, Vandana Shiva, GayatriSpivak, V. Geetha, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, GauriViswanathan, MedhaPatkar, Arundathi Roy show that western feminism does not address the problem of Indian women in particular and Asian women in general. Thus it is quite evident from the above discussion that feminism is not a homogenous phenomenon all the world over. Like Postmodernism, it eludes any specific definitions and hence it is appropriate to term feminism as a discourse. However women writing in India no doubt have provided a new dimension to Indian writing in English, and particularly to the Indian English Novel. NamitaGokhale's works is no exception to such a novelty. Her writings talk about the changing sociological status of Women in contemporary India.

In *Mountain Echoes* NamitaGokhale, brings into focus the four individualistic and highly spirited women who have consciously accepted the supremacy of the patriarchal value system by surrendering meekly to their traditionally assigned roles and allowing themselves to be dominated. What is of interest in *Mountain Echoes* is the fashion in which Gokhale's women attempt to redefine their status and index their selves by dwelling within the domestic framework and the situation given to them.

Mountain Echoes permeates to the readers through the consciousness of highly talented and individualistic women like Shivani, Tara Pande, Jeeya and ShakuntalaPande along with the evocative recollection of life in Kumaoni Hills. Born into an orthodox *Thuldothi* community the four women recollect not only about their past lives as mothers and grandmothers but also the fruits of education derived during the pre-independent era. Literacy in fact transforms them into cultural icons with an intense sense of loyalty to the clan and community.

The book unfolds with the conventional history of Kumaon region. The word 'Kumaon' is derived from 'Kurmanchal' the land of *Koormaavatar*, the 9th incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the form of a tortoise. It was also known as Uttarkoshal in *The Ramayana* and kingdom of Uttarakuru in *The Mahabharatha*.

Attracted by the salubrious environs of Kumaon, a huge succession of people were drawn from plains starting from tribes like *Kol*, *Kirats* and *Khasas* to the rulers of various dynasties like Kunindas, Katyuris, Malla and Chand from 500 B.C. to 12th century A.D. In 1790, Kumaon was crusaded by Gurkha rulers whose rule was quite barbaric and ruthless. Later, the

advent of the British rule in Kumaon region, which was once the abode of retreat, refuge and pilgrimage and the holy mountains of Veds, became tourist destinations. Moreover, *Kumaonis* were a martial race and the second world war had its impact in these remote mountains, for a large number of local populace had been recruited into the the British army.

It was during the medieval period, the influx of high-cast migrants from various parts of country into Kumaon took place. The place also saw the footages of several enlightened personalities like Swami Vivekananda ,RabindraNath Tagore, PanditMadanMalviya, Mohan Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and GovindVallabhPanth etc.

NamitaGokhale chooses these four women of extraordinary capability, intelligence, spirit and gaiety to bring out the reminiscences of the past lives of *Kumaoni* women and also to reflect the deepest and most intimate convolutions of culture and society in rapid transition. These women whose lives were attenuated to the household and to the rhythm of the life-cycle of successive generations reflect the religion, music, festivals and traditions of the region. The daily lives of these women were crowded with a never –ending succession of festivals, most of them involving fasts and the preparation of unique food. Traditionally, the lives of *Kumaoni* women were bound by the restrictions of fasting and ritual, and by the Brahminical injunctions against the consumption of all food not prepared by suitable Brahmins adhering to a strict code of prescribed practice.

To begin with, the author throws light on Shivani's life who lived a life of her own to the fullest extent adhering to all the orthodox norms of the society then. Amidst the dominance of the patriarchal system she was encouraged by the father to learn art, music and culture. She recalls how religious tolerance was promoted and women were emancipated. But Shivani remains perturbed about the rapid speed at which Kumaoni's were losing independence of mind and thoughts, the new society which has totally borrowed from the west and that they have to pay for this betrayal and might just become culturally bankrupt. She feels disillusioned at the "mindless westernization" spreading over her native place and region:

But I am perturbed about the rapid speed at which we are losing our independence of mind and thought to the new culture, the new thoughts, the new society which is totally borrowed from the West. Sometimes I feel that one day when inevitably, we have to pay for this betrayal; we might just become culturally bankrupt. (P 30)

But these things hardly had impact on her family for she was taught to share simple joys and sorrows with a great many people and persisted in their duties to their parents, siblings husband and children. More lamentations are explicit in her reminiscences when she tries to look at the world that has not changed for the better, and people not able to realize how much they have lost out in the process of change. She muses:

Of course, change is a fact of life. It is the law of Nature that which was past can never be present and what is today cannot be tomorrow. But the world has not changed for the better,

not at least in our country for which we cherished such great hopes. People do not realize how much we have lost out in this process of change. (P31-32)

Despite the conventional rules imposed on them, women created 'space' for themselves and lead their lives on their own in a meaningful and substantial way feeling gratified with whatever they possessed. Even amidst disasters women were able to confront the unexpected challenges and managed every hardship with great fortitude and indomitable spirit. Though girls were not sent to school but derived enough education in the form of fascinating stories narrated to them from the epics. And that was the way Shivani seemed to have picked up the flair of writing inspired by one Lohaniji, a servant who through his narration of stories seemed to have stirred up her vivid and fertile imagination and gave her the power to see beyond the realities of mundane day to day life. Apart from her day to day events ecology also had an indelible impact on her life, be it the tall Deodar trees or the thick Himalayan Oaks which were a standing witness to the story of humankind all enchanted and gave enough sustenance for her thoughts and life. According to an old adage, "grihinigrihagachati" A woman is the light of the house, or the Victorian conception of women as the 'Angel in the house', Shivani's sister's mother in law was no less in her intellectual capacities, she in turn had a great generosity not only to show hospitality to serve food to the largest number of visitors at home but also had a goodwill to educate her domestic servants as well. And we also come to know that when men of the family left to plains in search of a living it was women who took up the responsibility to look after the children and ruled the household with an iron hand maintaining discipline all around. Tara Pande is also another woman of kumaon region endowed with indomitable will and mettle who fights her sickness with extraordinary capacity has both happy and sad story to unwind. Though Tara Pande is a motherless child her Grannies did not lessen the quantum of love and concern towards her. Though only boys were encouraged to go to school and girls trained to look after the household business, Tara's father and husband encourage and infuse spirit in her to read and write. Tara Pande takes immense pride and delight in highlighting that she had a very enriching experience living in a large family:

We never felt alone or isolated, we knew we had the network of the family in time of crisis. Nobody ever flinched from their duties, and we all learnt our lessons in community living early in our childhood. We were all trained to help the weak, and to strengthen and encourage the talented. I think we were very lucky to live in large extended families. (P 68)

She also feels happy to express that there were no tensions within the family but only comradeship and a sense of common purpose which in turn had helped her children, through practice and precept, and pave them all to carve successful lives for themselves in the modern world. All the more, Tara Pande feels jubilant in executing vital values of successful and meaningful life, that is, her respect for elders, care and compassion for the young or sick or less fortunate- which remained the anchor of her life even during the autumnal phase of her life. Though Tara was a victim of Tuberculosis in her early teens, she did not feel dejected. Instead, she withdraws herself to the habit of reading and reflection whereby in the later years, her

father nurtures her writing talent to become a seasoned poet. She also recalls how she and her contemporaries were trained up to help the weak, and to strengthen and encourage the talented. But the saddest part was that women belonging to lower strata often became victims to dreadful diseases and in most cases their deaths were taken for granted. The kind of life women led, the uncompromising situations in which they lived, made them all the more susceptible to it. Strict adherence to discipline in no way subdued them; on the contrary, it made them stronger, more resilient to confront the challenges in a novel way. But the period of *Gurkhali* rule, broke the spirit of Kumaon. It also perpetuated a kind of terror psychosis that caused woman to recede into the background. Their natural independence was curbed for they now had to be protected against the barbarities of *Gurkha* rule. This was the historical reason why attitudes changed, and their situation changed into a marginalized one. Certain backwardness thus visited upon them. Some customs and rituals became really oppressive especially child marriage with the connected travails of early widowhood. This was a sad corollary to the wars men waged.

Like Shivani and Tara Pande, Jeeya was also born into a large orthodox family, where she learnt to live with and adapt to all sorts of circumstances, to respect the old, and look after the young, to nurse the sick and help the disabled. Besides, she recalls how she was ecstatic and enchanted by the beauty and mystery of Nature in and around Kumaon hills. Happily she states that the magic of the hills resides in music and the peculiar cultural harmony between the different sections of society in Kumaon is reflected in its music- all over India, and even across the border from Tibet. Blissfully she recollects how they celebrated the various feasts with great pomp and pleasure:

All these festivals, so much in rhythm with the cycles of Nature, and the life around us, refined our sensibilities and made us sensible to our environment. The cultural life in Almora was also quite extraordinary. There were artistes like Brewster, and the national poets SumitraNandan Pant. The Mirtaula Ashram, also known as Uttar Vrindavan, was another hub for intellectuals and creative people. (P 110-111)

Her education in a Christian institution at Almora instilled the Christian values which existed beside the *samskaras* of her ancestral home. But at times she feels rather desperate to see how eternal values like Honesty and integrity have become devalued and somehow she feels rather reluctant to fight for rights, and demand vociferously, when she believes that it could be exercised with a quiet but unshakable sense of determination. Gokhale's own words are apt here: "In my upbringing in subliminal code, I have imbibed from these women 'femininity' that never stood for weakness and gender was never congruent with anything but strength, physical, emotional and moral of my sex".

Last but not the least ShakuntalaPande also had her formal education in a Christian school which moulded and gave enough exposure to her talents. After her marriage, she recalls her life was tough, filled with rituals and rigid norms but acclimatized herself to the new challenges she confronted in the new household. Thus the positive attitude of these women is

an outcome of their inner strength which enable them to withstand social oppression. Their strength does not lie in their muscular power but in their inherent capacity for compassion, sacrifice, nurturance and acceptance of the inevitable. Chronicling the experience of these four Indian women, Gokhale shows them as the pillars of the society- supporting, strengthening and enduring certain social conventions and attitude that victimize women. These Bold and Beautiful women who led the life of austerity were chaste and modest in their ways set as a fine example for the upcoming generation. They were the excellent writers who not only gave voice to their repressed feelings, emotions and ideas but also other marginalized women of both upper and lower strata of the Kumaon region. These women try to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be true to their selves and there is no need for hypocrisy. However what makes them stand apart is their bold proclamation of freedom, creating a space for themselves especially in their personal lives. women in Gokhale's *Mountain Echoes* stand as a testimony for effectively communicating an intensely apprehended feminine sensibility, apparently injecting a new consciousness, offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values as well as highlighting our cultural heritage. The book also reveals how women are traditional in their way of living but modern in their outlook and have the capacity to retain their individuality, how these women characters possess an admirable strength to face the calamities of life and are adept at the wisdom of compromise and adjustment. Moreover these women protagonists achieve Individuation or selfhood yet they do not negate their family or the society. They go beyond what Elaine Showalter calls "the Feminine, Female and Feminist" phases and perform Jungian "Individuation", to possess an integrated "Self".

Such a self discovery, one should notice here, invariably paves way for a novel voice to surface for "suppression necessitates expression". Writers like Namita Gokhale along with the host of emerging writers in India has not only provided an opportunity for women to Indent and Index themselves through writing but has also provided a platform and springboard for all the marginalized, subaltern voices to voice them/selves.

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